

Report on Lutheran World Federation



ISSUED BY

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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**The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod
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The committee appointed by the *Praesidium* of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, pursuant to Resolution 2, page 563, *Proceedings of the Forty-Second Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Houston, Texas, 1953*, has endeavored to carry out the task assigned to it by Synod:

Resolved, That the *Praesidium* of Synod appoint a committee of three to

- 1) study the constitution and objectives of the Lutheran World Federation;
- 2) evaluate the practical working of this body in the light of Scriptural doctrine and practice;
- 3) make recommendations with respect to action by Synod in the matter of the invitation to membership in the Lutheran World Federation or the extent of possible co-operation with the same;
- 4) submit its findings and recommendations to the College of Presidents by September, 1954, for study and possible amendment, after which they shall be submitted to all pastors and congregations of Synod by January 1, 1955, for study with a view to action at Synod's general convention in 1956.

We the committee apologize for the fact that the complexity and the delicacy of our task made it impossible for us to meet the deadline requirements of paragraph four.

I

The question of membership in the Lutheran World Federation must be answered on a doctrinal and confessional basis. The confessional position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod on church fellowship has been set forth in the Brief Statement, paragraphs 28 and 29, as follows:

28. Since God ordained that His Word *only*, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church,

1 Peter 4:11: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

John 8:31, 32: "Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on Him, If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

1 Tim. 6:3, 4: "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings."

all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, and in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them.

Rom. 16:17: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."

We repudiate *unionism*, that is, church-fellowship with the heterodox adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church,

Rom. 16:17: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."

2 John 9, 10: "Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed."

and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely.

2 Tim. 2:17-21: "And their word will eat as doth a canker; of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some. Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor, and some to dishonor. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work."

29. The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is *actually* taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications. On the other hand, a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combated and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline.

Acts 20:30: "Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."

1 Tim. 1:3: "As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine."

This doctrinal stand has been substantially reiterated in the Common Confession I, Section IX:

It is the duty of the Church to be faithful to the Lord and His Word in all its testimony, to be steadfast in its confession of His truth at all times, and to avoid and combat error. It is the duty of the Church to mold and keep its practice in conformity with the Lord's directives in the Holy Scriptures. Therefore we dare not condone error or have pulpit fellowship and unscriptural co-operation with erring individuals, church bodies, or church groups that refuse to be corrected by God's Word. We must also be alert and susceptible to the Lord's leading to establish and maintain fellowship with those whom He has made one with us in the faith, and to seek to win the erring and wayward for unity in the true faith. We are mindful of our Lord's intercessory prayer that we, who are His brethren, may be one, even as He and the Father are one.

These statements represent The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's understanding and application of the statements of the Lutheran Confessions on church fellowship, especially Articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession.

With the stand on church fellowship which our Synod has taken in these

documents membership in the Lutheran World Federation would, we believe, conflict; for the activities envisioned by its Constitution and the actual functioning of the Federation make it clear that membership in the Lutheran World Federation does involve church fellowship; the name "Federation" does not alter anything in this respect, for the name cannot make joint activities which per se involve confessional commitment into confessionally neutral acts.

We urge that the Constitution of the Lutheran World Federation is not actually federative in character, since it assigns to the Federation as such functions and activities which are churchly in character and, therefore, presupposes a confessionally-unanimous constituency, which in the case of the Lutheran Church Federation admittedly does not exist. A consideration of the following points will make this clear:

A. The Lutheran World Federation lists among its purposes: "to bear united witness before the world to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the power of God for salvation" (Constitution III, 2, a). The Lutheran World Federation is herein acting as only a church can act. (The witnessing subject is the Lutheran World Federation.) As such, the Lutheran World Federation (since it does not presume to scrutinize a member church's *de facto* adherence to Scriptures and the Confessions) is giving equal room and scope to orthodox and heterodox churches and their proclamation. The ultimate question of truth or error, of orthodoxy or heterodoxy, is being bypassed. Consequently, membership on the part of a confessionally conscientious and courageous church is made impossible. Such a church could, of course, utilize the forum of the Lutheran World Federation to make its testimony heard; but in view of the actual confessional quality of member churches of the Lutheran World Federation such as Sweden, Brazil, Batak, and Pomerania, there could be no question of a really *united* witness. And if the testimony given within the Lutheran World Federation is to be merely negative, it may fairly be urged that that testimony can best be given outside the Lutheran World Federation.

B. Another purpose of the Lutheran World Federation is "to foster Lutheran participation in ecumenical movements" (Constitution III, 2, d). The purpose as stated leaves unasked and unanswered the highly important question whether the "ecumenical movements" are to be scrutinized as to their true ecumenicity (that is, of a genuine love and concern for the whole Body of Christ) or are merely or predominantly a part of the present-day tendency toward mass-church formations on the basis of the least common confessional denominator.

C. Another purpose of the Lutheran World Federation is "to support Lutheran groups in need of spiritual or material aid" (Constitution III, 2, f). Now, an evaluation of the practical workings of the Lutheran World Federation is difficult, since any attempt to evaluate them is complicated by the fact that the lines of demarcation between the missionary and educational endeavors of the Lutheran World Federation and those of individual member churches are vague and sometimes artificially established. To cite but one instance from South America: A Lutheran student pastor at Porto Alegre in Brazil was sponsored jointly by the Lutheran World Federation's Committee on Latin America with the United States' Lutheran Student Association, the Lutheran Church of Brazil, and the Foreign

Office of the Evangelical Church in Germany—this last a federation of Lutheran and Reformed Churches. (See *Lutheran Standard*, August 20, 1955.) In any case, the confessional question is again raised. We ask again: Can an orthodox church body be a party to spiritual aid in which orthodox and heterodox bodies unite, to an action in which the critical question of the Scriptural and confessional quality of that aid is left unanswered? The stated purpose of the Lutheran World Federation “to develop a united Lutheran approach to responsibilities in missions and education” (Constitution, III, 2, 3) raises the same question, though not so directly, and should be carefully considered by both the theologians and the missionary and educational authorities of our church. In all such cases we are forced to ask ourselves: How can a church carry on common evangelistic, missionary, and educational work with churches to which it must (for compelling reasons) refuse pulpit and altar fellowship? How can it entrust its missionary, or educational, or other spiritual ministries to men whom it feels constrained to call to repentance for teaching or tolerating error? Or, conversely, how can a church refuse pulpit and altar fellowship to men and churches with whom it (by membership in the Federation) is sharing the most central and sacred tasks of the church?

D. The Lutheran World Federation is at pains to make plain in its Constitution (III, 1) that the autonomy of the member churches is safeguarded. Organizational autonomy is, no doubt, guaranteed, but the actual working of the Federation in the areas which its Constitution designates does in fact impair the *confessional* autonomy of the member churches. Member churches are by the fact of their membership and by the fact that they contribute to the support of the Federation’s activities committed to a public assent to activities in which orthodox and heterodox bodies have equal voice and influence. Member churches have in reality surrendered their confessional autonomy. The fact remains that the Lutheran World Federation can hardly be considered a platform where a confessionally conscientious church may stand and meet its fellow Lutherans, its confessional integrity fully safeguarded.

E. The confessional integrity of member churches is also endangered by the nature of the Assemblies of the Federation. The Assemblies of the Lutheran World Federation are marked by a strong common-worship character; the common participation in the Lord’s Supper at Hanover in 1952, while not a part of the official program of the Lutheran World Federation Assembly, yet was and remains an impressive and ineradicable testimony to an assumed oneness, a testimony to which member churches are by the fact of their membership committed.

II

Furthermore, a question of this sort cannot be answered responsibly and in the fear of God without a consideration of the effect of our action upon synods and church groups now affiliated with us. Since our sister synods in the Synodical Conference and our affiliates in Germany, England, Australia, and France will be deeply affected by any action we take regarding the Lutheran World Federation; and since, furthermore, representatives of our Synod have, at Uelzen in their deliberations with sister churches, indicated a loving consideration for the convic-

tions and feelings of sister churches and a desire to act in concert with them in this matter (they could not, of course, "bind" their synod to anything), we urge that the action recommended be taken in the closest consultation and co-operation with the affiliates of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

III

There is still another consideration. Since any connection on our part with the Lutheran World Federation will be motivated by a desire to promote a true theological unity among Lutherans; and since, furthermore, membership in a federation cannot in itself be made a duty even where no decisive confessional reasons forbid membership; it behooves us at this time to remember that in the past God has in His grace given to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and its affiliates the grace of a peculiarly distinct and courageous confessional utterance and the strength to walk alone where walking alone was necessary. We ought to acknowledge this gift in all humility; and we ought, therefore, to exercise a wise stewardship in the fulfilling of our responsibility to bear an uncompromising and winning witness. Where and how can we, in making our testimony felt, best show our gratitude to the God of history? Above all, where will a voice uttering the genuinely Lutheran concern for purity of doctrine be most effective? A resolve to speak for Lutheranism outside the Lutheran World Federation should not be interpreted as "traditional isolationism." The stand we are advocating is not the easy way out; rather, such a stand will require sober courage of a high order. Let us, therefore, take the God of history, the God who has shaped our history and marked our path for us, seriously, both for our warning and for our encouragement.

On the basis of these considerations, we recommend that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod decline the invitation to become a member in the Lutheran World Federation which was extended to it at its Forty-Second Regular Convention (*Proceedings*, p. 558).

We also urge that our reply to the Lutheran World Federation make it clear that this action is not to be construed as indicating a lack of interest in, or of a sense of responsibility for, world Lutheranism but is taken out of a profound sense of responsibility for the essential unity of the Lutheran Church. This sense of responsibility should, moreover, move The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to express its readiness to discuss this matter further with official representatives of the Lutheran World Federation. If the officials of the Lutheran World Federation feel that our Synod's position is based on premises not firmly founded in Scripture or on a faulty interpretation of the Constitution and program of work of the Lutheran World Federation, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is in conscience bound to give them a full and fair hearing.

A consideration of the three points urged above will also, we believe, mark out for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod "the extent of possible co-operation" with the Lutheran World Federation.

November 1, 1955

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